Chapter XXIII.

And so much depends upon the craft which, made by man, is one with man, that the sea shall wear for him another aspect. I remember once seeing the commander--officially the master, by courtesy the captain--of a fine iron ship of the old wool fleet shaking his head at a very pretty brigantine. She was bound the other way. She was a taut, trim, neat little craft, extremely well kept; and on that serene evening when we passed her close she looked the embodiment of coquettish comfort on the sea. It was somewhere near the Cape-- THE Cape being, of course, the Cape of Good Hope, the Cape of Storms of its Portuguese discoverer. And whether it is that the word "storm" should not be pronounced upon the sea where the storms dwell thickly, or because men are shy of confessing their good hopes, it has become the nameless cape--the Cape tout court. The other great cape of the world, strangely enough, is seldom if ever called a cape. We say, "a voyage round the Horn"; "we rounded the Horn"; "we got a frightful battering off the Horn"; but rarely "Cape Horn," and, indeed, with some reason, for Cape Horn is as much an island as a cape. The third stormy cape of the world, which is the Leeuwin, receives generally its full name, as if to console its second-rate dignity. These are the capes that look upon the gales.

The little brigantine, then, had doubled the Cape. Perhaps she was coming from Port Elizabeth, from East London--who knows? It was many years ago, but I remember well the captain of the wool-clipper nodding at her with the words, "Fancy having to go about the sea in a thing like that!"

He was a man brought up in big deep-water ships, and the size of the craft under his feet was a part of his conception of the sea. His own ship was certainly big as ships went then. He may have thought of the size of his cabin, or--unconsciously, perhaps--have conjured up a vision of a vessel so small tossing amongst the great seas. I didn't inquire, and to a young second mate the captain of the little pretty brigantine, sitting astride a camp stool with his chin resting on his hands that were crossed upon the rail, might have appeared a minor king amongst men. We passed her within earshot, without a hail, reading each other's names with the naked eye.

Some years later, the second mate, the recipient of that almost involuntary mutter, could have told his captain that a man brought up in big ships may yet take a peculiar delight in what we should both then have called a small craft. Probably the captain of the big ship would not have understood very well. His answer would have been a gruff, "Give me size," as I heard another man reply to a

remark praising the handiness of a small vessel. It was not a love of the grandiose or the prestige attached to the command of great tonnage, for he continued, with an air of disgust and contempt, "Why, you get flung out of your bunk as likely as not in any sort of heavy weather."

I don't know. I remember a few nights in my lifetime, and in a big ship, too (as big as they made them then), when one did not get flung out of one's bed simply because one never even attempted to get in; one had been made too weary, too hopeless, to try. The expedient of turning your bedding out on to a damp floor and lying on it there was no earthly good, since you could not keep your place or get a second's rest in that or any other position. But of the delight of seeing a small craft run bravely amongst the great seas there can be no question to him whose soul does not dwell ashore. Thus I well remember a three days' run got out of a little barque of 400 tons somewhere between the islands of St. Paul and Amsterdam and Cape Otway on the Australian coast. It was a hard, long gale, gray clouds and green sea, heavy weather undoubtedly, but still what a sailor would call manageable. Under two lower topsails and a reefed foresail the barque seemed to race with a long, steady sea that did not becalm her in the troughs. The solemn thundering combers caught her up from astern, passed her with a fierce boiling up of foam level with the bulwarks, swept on ahead with a swish and a roar: and the little vessel, dipping her jib-boom into the tumbling froth, would go on running in a smooth, glassy hollow, a deep valley between two ridges of the sea, hiding the horizon ahead and astern. There was such fascination in her pluck, nimbleness, the continual exhibition of unfailing seaworthiness, in the semblance of courage and endurance, that I could not give up the delight of watching her run through the three unforgettable days of that gale which my mate also delighted to extol as "a famous shove."

And this is one of those gales whose memory in after-years returns, welcome in dignified austerity, as you would remember with pleasure the noble features of a stranger with whom you crossed swords once in knightly encounter and are never to see again. In this way gales have their physiognomy. You remember them by your own feelings, and no two gales stamp themselves in the same way upon your emotions. Some cling to you in woebegone misery; others come back fiercely and weirdly, like ghouls bent upon sucking your strength away; others, again, have a catastrophic splendour; some are unvenerated recollections, as of spiteful wild-cats clawing at your agonized vitals; others are severe, like a visitation; and one or two rise up draped and mysterious, with an aspect of ominous menace. In each of them there is a characteristic point at which the whole feeling seems contained in one single moment. Thus there is a certain four o'clock in the morning in the confused roar of a black and white world when coming on deck to take charge of my watch I received the instantaneous impression that the ship could not live for another hour in such a raging sea.

I wonder what became of the men who silently (you couldn't hear yourself speak) must have shared that conviction with me. To be left to write about it is not, perhaps, the most enviable fate; but the point is that this impression resumes in its intensity the whole recollection of days and days of desperately dangerous weather. We were then, for reasons which it is not worth while to specify, in the close neighbourhood of Kerguelen Land; and now, when I open an atlas and look at the tiny dots on the map of the Southern Ocean, I see as if engraved upon the paper the enraged physiognomy of that gale.

Another, strangely, recalls a silent man. And yet it was not din that was wanting; in fact, it was terrific. That one was a gale that came upon the ship swiftly, like a parnpero, which last is a very sudden wind indeed. Before we knew very well what was coming all the sails we had set had burst; the furled ones were blowing loose, ropes flying, sea hissing--it hissed tremendously--wind howling, and the ship lying on her side, so that half of the crew were swimming and the other half clawing desperately at whatever came to hand, according to the side of the deck each man had been caught on by the catastrophe, either to leeward or to windward. The shouting I need not mention--it was the merest drop in an ocean of noise--and yet the character of the gale seems contained in the recollection of one small, not particularly impressive, sallow man without a cap and with a very still face. Captain Jones--let us call him Jones--had been caught unawares. Two orders he had given at the first sign of an utterly unforeseen onset; after that the magnitude of his mistake seemed to have overwhelmed him. We were doing what was needed and feasible. The ship behaved well. Of course, it was some time before we could pause in our fierce and laborious exertions; but all through the work, the excitement, the uproar, and some dismay, we were aware of this silent little man at the break of the poop, perfectly motionless, soundless, and often hidden from us by the drift of sprays.

When we officers clambered at last upon the poop, he seemed to come out of that numbed composure, and shouted to us down wind: "Try the pumps." Afterwards he disappeared. As to the ship, I need not say that, although she was presently swallowed up in one of the blackest nights I can remember, she did not disappear. In truth, I don't fancy that there had ever been much danger of that, but certainly the experience was noisy and particularly distracting-- and yet it is the memory of a very quiet silence that survives.